Open Feedback Dialog

Three candidates reach for the throne

Like

By Tatiana Schlossberg 9 September 2011 No Comments

The story of New Haven is the story of post-industrial America. A mid-size city that flourished in the era when America made things, New Haven is a city that falters as it tries to navigate between old traditions and new realities.

Some of the problems are endemic to cities like New Haven: a high unemployment rate, abandoned factories, a downtown that is vibrant only in fits and starts, a struggling public school system. Certain features are peculiar to New Haven: the presence of one of the world's foremost educational institutions with billions of dollars at its disposal; a mayor who has governed for a generation with the support of only 20 percent of the registered voting population.

And yet, the belief persists that the problems are not systemic; that our system of checks and balances preserves the mechanisms for peaceful change—political, financial, and otherwise.

In that hope, Anthony Dawson, Clifton Graves, and Jeffrey Kerekes are running against Mayor John DeStefano, Jr. in this upcoming Tuesday's Democratic primary, collectively hoping to unseat the longest-serving mayor in New Haven's history.

"Eight years is good enough for the President of the United States. It should be good enough for the mayor of New Haven," resounds the general rallying cry of the Democratic challenge to the mayor.

Kerekes has put this slogan to good use: It pipes across his pamphlets and his website, and he has passed that torch to both of his competitors, each of whom employs the turn of phrase.
"We do benefit from term limits," Kerekes explained. "New Haven has essentially become a one-party town. And if that's the case, you don't get the same vibrant exchange of ideas. The Democratic Party has become the John DeStefano Party."

Although many officials in the party would probably prefer to see themselves as acting independently of the mayor's interests and out of his shadow, Kerekes sees the problem as more structural than that. "It stunts democracy when you don't have challenges to the national party structure. It stunts any ongoing challenge to the way things are done."

He may have a point. DeStefano has served as Mayor of New Haven for 18 years, winning nine consecutive elections. The last major challenge to his control of city politics was in 2001, when Rep. Martin Looney, now majority leader of the Connecticut State Senate, threatened to topple what Kerekes calls "DeStefano's stranglehold on city politics."

This creates a second problem for those interested in holding the city's highest office: They end up running against the mayor and against the prospect (or reality) of endless leadership, rather than running for the city.

Kerekes contests this idea, at least as it applies to him: "A lot of people propose changes to deal with DeStefano, and they're not acting in the interests of the city."

Alderman Michael Jones, SY '11, who serves Ward 1, sees voter complacency as the problem, rather than the absence of term limits. "On The West Wing, Jed Bartlett is asked about whether he believes in term limits. He says, 'We have term limits. They're called elections.'
"For folks our age, DeStefano has been in office for a long time—since 1993, which is as long as most of us can remember. But, voters have the opportunity to elect someone different every two years," Jones said. "And they haven't."

Cynthia Horan, who teaches classes on city politics and does research on the political economy of cities, has a different view of term limits, especially as they apply to New Haven.
"I think term limits have a purpose, although I don't think they solve everything," she said. "They do encourage challengers by definition. But, I don't think term limits boost turnout. What does push turnout is to have local elections at the same time as state or federal elections. But this year, people are also voting in aldermanic primaries, and you may be able to get people to the polls who then turn to the mayoral race as well."

In 2010, when both a Senate seat and the governorship were up for grabs, only 43 percent of the population turned out to vote, two-thirds of the number that showed up to vote in the 2008 election. This year, when there are no federal positions on the ballot, amassing a sizable voter turnout might be difficult, despite the many Aldermanic seats in play.

An increase in voter turnout, however, may not be what Mayor DeStefano wants politically, explains Horan. "Given the limited fiscal resources of most cities, incumbent mayors have a strong incentive to depress turnout. In that way, they have fewer constituencies that they then have to reward, for lack of a better term.

"I'm not sure Mayor DeStefano has a strategy to depress turnout," Horan continued, "but the more people think he can't be beat, the more people won't go out to vote. And in a city where you don't have different political parties, you don't increase turnout."

In the past five mayoral elections, DeStefano has won the general election with at least 70 percent of the vote. There are 55,000 or so registered voters in New Haven, and yet, DeStefano has not amassed more than 15,000 votes in the last
10 years. "I mean, he really could be mayor forever," said Horan.

IN TERMS OF NEW HAVEN POLITICAL history, DeStefano is part of a tradition of long-serving mayors. Elizur Goodrich, a Federalist, served as New Haven's mayor for 17 years, from 1803 to 1822. More notably, and more relevant, Richard C. Lee served as New Haven's mayor for 16 years, from 1954 to 1970. Lee is most famous for ushering in an era of urban renewal, eradicating city neighborhoods to make room for the concrete skeleton of highways that connects the body of New Haven to the
world outside.

Much of Mayor DeStefano's city planning projects have come as part of an effort to undo the infrastructural developments of the Lee era—closing the Coliseum, building over the Oak St. Connector to Route 34, creating bike lanes, encouraging preservation of historic neighborhoods, promoting new restaurants and small business development.

Professor Elihu Rubin, SY '99, Visiting Assistant Professor of Urbanism, said of Mayor Lee and his contemporaries, "I empathize with the leaders of that time. They were Democrats and progressives, it was the period of the best and the brightest, and they thought that the best mechanism to revive the city was to eradicate the slums. But, what they might call a slum, we call a neighborhood. We might want to keep that neighborhood, because now we live in an era of gentrification, and we would want to preserve that character.

"They thought they were saving the city, but now our values have changed," Rubin continued. "We now value the continuous fabric of the city, and we now view urban renewal critically, from the perspective of race relationships and gender relationships. It's almost always poor people who are displaced in the projects of urban renewal."

For Mayor DeStefano, urban development, much of which Rubin said is geared towards the "farmer's market crowd," necessarily excludes a vast section of New Haven's population—those who lie outside the corporate interests of industry on one side, and have yet to align their tastes with the yuppies, rejecting the predilection for farmer's markets and other things of their ilk. On the other hand, this kind of development has strengthened the partnership between Yale and the city, bringing the University out of the bunker it built for itself in the rough decades of the 1970s and '80s.

DeStefano and President Levin, GRD '74, rose to their positions in the same year, which lends credence to the idea that the partnership between the city and the school is partially due to whatever personal relationship they have. While it's difficult to imagine that Yale would retreat from the New Haven it has helped create if a new mayor were to be elected, it's interesting to imagine how the relationship might change with a new mayor who represents a different set of interests and governs with a different mandate.

"I think any mayor would have a good relationship with Yale," maintained Horan. "President Levin would work with whoever is mayor of New Haven."

"I don't know if I would have moved to New Haven without having the secondary benefits of Yale," said Kerekes. "But, just as New Haven is better because Yale's here, Yale benefits from New Haven; Yale needs New Haven."

For many, DeStefano's cultivation of a good town-gown relationship is his most notable achievement. However, even there, Graves sees room for improvement, asking things of the University that the city has yet to request.

"I would love to convene representatives from the School of Management, the Economics department, Quinnipiac, University of New Haven and Southern University's School of Business, and community leaders with practical expertise. We need them to give us some insight on how to get out of this quandary we're in. We can't purport to know all the answers. We need innovative and inventive solutions to New Haven's crises."

He seems puzzled, too, by the contrast between the vast resources Yale is able to conjure, and the conditions of acute poverty that plague New Haven.

"I know the endowment is a whole separate fund that you can't touch, but New Haven is in the grips and throes of a financial crisis, with a murder every week over the summer. Then, Yale announces under the radar that it's raised $3.5 billion over the past five years—well if that's the case, then the development folks can put their energy into raising some money for us. They should help us get more resources for this city. Just a portion of that $3.5 billion would get New Haven out
of its crisis."

A Yale bailout, which is essentially what Graves proposes, seems unlikely, both because it wouldn't stimulate independent economic development, and because Yale already makes a sizable financial contribution to the city, in part to compensate for the absence of property taxes paid as a non-profit organization. According to the Yale

Office of New Haven and State Affairs, Yale pays New Haven over 15 million dollars every year, through a combination of “taxes, voluntary payments, and fees.”

There are alternatives to the extreme measure of a Yale bailout. “In the City of Boston, they just started a policy where the city releases tax bills to big non-profits, showing them the taxes they would pay. Of course, they can’t force them to pay taxes, but it makes a political statement,” noted Horan. “I think this should be done in New Haven, but not for Yale—Yale pays. There are other institutions and corporations that could pay, but don’t.”

However, with so many landholders off the tax roll, the burden does fall unevenly. “45 percent of our land is off the tax rolls, because of Yale and state and federal parks. And since we only have three or four financially stable neighborhoods, they end up paying the ticket for the city. As a result, two thirds of our budget comes from the state and from the federal government. We’re at the mercy of the state, and if their budget contracts, there’s no way for us to bounce back,” explained Kerekes.

From that perspective, Yale’s expansion, even as it revitalizes downtown New Haven, doesn’t always come at the financial interests of the city. “When they take land off the property tax roll, the question becomes, ‘Is it possible for Yale to expand without sinking New Haven?’ They could pursue alternatives, like renting a space, because then the landlord pays taxes. It’s not advantageous to Yale, but it’s good for New Haven,” said Kerekes.

While Yale may be a multi-billion dollar institution sufficiently watered by new revenue streams, it’s worth questioning the sustainability of policies that require Yale to bankroll the city’s expenses.

BY SEPT. 5, 2011, THE NUMBER OF homicides in New Haven reached 25. That number is already higher than the total number of homicides in the city in 2010—22—and more than twice the number in 2009. In 2011, all but two of the victims were African-American, despite the fact that blacks comprise only one-third of the total population.

If there is blame to be laid for the climbing murder rate in the city, it might not fall on the mayor. Instead, it may be symptomatic of the larger issues that plague many urban areas: unemployment, poverty and a failing schools system. The graduation rate in public schools in New Haven comes in at 27 percent for the class of 2008, the most recent year data is available.

Each of the candidates has proposed adding more youth programs to get kids off the streets, increasing parental responsibility for juvenile offenders, and reinstating community policing, which takes police officers out of their cars, and puts them on the street. The goal of such a program is to have officer engagement with the communities they police, develop personal relationships with families, and deter crime at this intimate level.

Jeffrey Kerekes points to the Chief of Police as another problem plaguing law enforcement. “You have a Chief whose wife lives in Chicago, and he commutes there on the weekends. The police force voted ‘no confidence’ in the chief, and he’s still there. You have a morale problem, and that doesn’t help the problem of getting crime solved.

“You need a Chief of Police who’s committed to living here full time,” Kerekes continues, “and having cops live here in New Haven—80 percent of the cops don’t live here. If you live here full-time, you know and care about the city, and you have something at stake, which is that you don’t want your own property value to go down.”

He is also offering a secondary policing effort: To pull more cars over on traffic violations, in the hopes that those pulled over would be the same people who are transporting, purchasing, or using drugs and weapons.

But these seem to be Band-Aid solutions in place of surgeries. Crime follows poverty, which in turn is symptomatic of unemployment and poor educational systems.

Horan is a resident of the East Rock neighborhood, which is part of the same policing district of Newhallville. “I used to go to some of the meetings there, which are pretty sobering and depressing. No one should have to live in that way. It’s a working-class black neighborhood, and the jobs are gone. Then you have a lot of prisoners

returning to the neighborhood, many of whom aren't from New Haven.

"Schools are never brought up in the context of crime. A lot of kids are thrown out of school, and then the truancy in New Haven is huge, and I don't know how much the Board of Education gets involved."

For Horan and for others, the Board of Education poses a major roadblock to a functional educational system, which has reverberations in the city's crime rates. "In the city charter, the Board of Alderman can engage in line-item vetoes of the budget, but they can't do that when it comes to the Board of Education," she explains.

Instead, the Board of Education is appointed by the mayor, and does not undergo a review process for job continuance. Many of the administrators on the board are paid over $100,000 per year. Graves proposes that they take a 10 percent pay cut in order to allocate some of those funds to the schools, quelling the complaints of teachers and students that they have no books or supplies.

He has an additional proposal: "We need to have an elected Board of Education, or a hybrid of half-elected and half-appointed members. We need to respect the democratic process, or else people get smug, comfortable and arrogant."
In terms of urban trends, Horan says that most cities have moved away from having elected Boards of Education. "But, it can't get any worse than the current Board of Education in New Haven. It reinforces the power of the mayor, and it's a patronage position."

While it seems to be in everyone's interest (except perhaps the mayor's) to wipe away the opacity that clouds city governance, especially as it applies to education and crime, it's clear that each problem cannot be solved without a holistic approach—there is no remedy for crime and for the education system that comes without economic revitalization, which in terms means little if it isn't accompanied by plans to tackle crime, education and community development.

WHILE IT WOULD BE UNFAIR TO SAY that each candidate isn't serious about his campaign for mayor, the challenge in many ways seems to be a nominal one: It is about speaking electoral truth to the mayor's power in a community that has long been apathetic about both.

None of the candidates has the support of the Unions, which hold the most clout in the city, behind the mayor. Instead, the Unions have focused their energy on the Aldermanic races, hoping to get control of the Board, and put pressure on Mayor DeStefano through that legislative channel, perhaps in the hope of priming a candidate for the next mayoral election.
Additionally, instead of uniting behind one candidate who might have a decent shot at diluting the mayor's electoral power, the three candidates threaten to split the vote of those disenchanted with DeStefano's spell. "There is consternation about splitting the vote," said Graves. "There are two black candidates, and that makes even race an underlying issue."

The real obstacle to these campaigns, at the end of the day, is DeStefano himself. As a mayor who has served for almost two decades, he knows the city, and how to operate it, better than any of his challengers. "They're going to sound like novices, and they have to appeal to their individual constituencies, which the Mayor doesn't have to do. They just won't sound as competent or knowledgeable by comparison."

But, as they each maintain, the democratic process—the prevention of patronage, dynastic rule, and sluggish inaction—depends on their ability to challenge the status quo. Our founding document, the Declaration of Independence, gives reason enough to suppose that this kind of political dissolution is often necessary in the course of human events. At the end of the day, even John DeStefano can't argue with Thomas Jefferson.

SHARE

Like 2 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Leave a Comment

Name (required)

Email (will not be published) (required)

Submit Comment

This Week

- A&E
- Bullblog Feature
- Covers
- Featured
- Intramural
- News
- Opinion
- Sports
- The Bullblog
- Top Story
- Uncategorized
- Yale Herald Literary Special

Archives

- September 2011
- August 2011
- May 2011
- April 2011
- March 2011
- February 2011
- January 2011
- December 2010

- November 2010
- October 2010
- September 2010
- August 2010
- July 2010
- June 2010
- May 2010
- April 2010
- March 2010
- February 2010
- January 2010
- December 2009
- November 2009
- October 2009
- September 2009

© 2011 The Yale Herald | Web Design & Development by Brandon Jackson | Log in | Entries (RSS) | Comments (RSS)